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AUTHOR Schmidt, Steven D.
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ABSTRACT

Returning adult students enrolled in graduate programs at the University of Wisconsin's School of Education and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences were studied. The sample of 25 male and 48 female students were 25 years of age and older, U.S. citizens, and had been out of school for 3 years. Students completed a biographical assessment, a "barriers to learning" instrument, Rosenberg's Total Self-Esteem Scale, and Canfield's Learning Styles Inventory. Ninety-five percent of the students returned to the university to broaden existing careers or expand into new ones. Sixty percent of respondents considered job/family/school time at least somewhat of a problem. Significant differences were found between males and females in learning style preferences. Females indicated a significantly higher preference for using language as a media for learning, while males expected to obtain higher grades than did females. Fifty-three percent of the students indicated a strong or very strong preference for establishing their own learning goals within the classroom. The results indicate that while the returning adult students wanted to set their own learning goals, independent of the instructor, they valued the role of the teacher as content expert and climate setter. (SW)

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Understanding the Culture of Adults Returning to Higher Education: Barriers to Learning and Preferred Learning Styles

A Report of Research
in Progress

by

Steven D. Schmidt
Research Assistant

The Department of Continuing
and
Vocational Education

University of Wisconsin - Madison
267 Teacher Education Building
225 North Mills Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

(608) 263-5036

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The last decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of adult students returning to university and college campuses. Jerold Apps characterizes this movement as a 'quiet revolution', less pronounced but reminiscent of the period following World War II when veterans flooded college campuses across the country, trading the G.I. Bill of Rights for college degrees (1). Recent national surveys indicate that almost 40% of all courses taken by adults on a part-time basis are conducted on two and four-year campuses. Many students are returning adults - aged 25 years and older. For example, enrollment data for the 1981/82 school year at the University of Wisconsin-Madison indicated that 30% of the 41,000-plus students were 25 years of age and older. Adults are returning to higher education on a full and part-time basis in increasing numbers. However, as in the latter 1940's, university and college campuses are not prepared for this influx of older students. Campus administrators and instructors are now asking serious questions about this new population and are in need of information that can help them make decisions consistent with the needs of returning adult students. Therefore, a four-year study was initiated in the Fall of 1980 to identify the characteristics of this population, their perceived barriers to learning and their preferred learning styles.

A sample of 73 subjects was selected from newly enrolled U.W.-Madison graduate students in the School of Education and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences over a three semester period. The sample was stratified on the following characteristics: 1) 25 years of age and older; 2) U.S. citizens; 3) three years between previous and current college course enrollments. Data was collected in a structured interview setting using fourteen open-ended questions and a battery of four questionnaires. Questionnaires included a biographical assessment, a 25-item 'barriers to learning' instrument (4), Rosenberg's Total Self-Esteem Scale (10), and Canfield's Learning Styles Inventory (3). Each interview was tape-recorded following the subject's completion of the questionnaire battery. The average time to completion was 55 minutes.

The sample of students consisted of 25 males and 48 females with a median age of 30.1 years. Twenty-one students were enrolled in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 52 in the School of Education. Forty-six respondents were married (30 had at least one child), 17 had never been married and 10 were divorced or separated. Twenty-two were employed full-time, 34 part-time and 14 were unemployed at the time of the study. Three people had taken a one-year leave of absence to attend school. Most students were entering their graduate degree programs with a Bachelor's degree (n=36), while 34 had some Master's work before entering. Three subjects reported some Ph.D. work. The majority (53%) were full-time students, taking nine or more semester credits. The remainder were part-time students. The median length of time out of school was 5.2 years, 40 people having been out three to five years. One individual reported being out of school 22 years, another 27 years.

Open-ended interview data revealed that almost all of the adult students interviewed (95%) returned to the university to broaden existing careers or expand into new ones. Response categories parallel those reported by Apps and others (1,2,5,6,7). In response to the question, "What are your expectations of a college class instructor?", most students indicated that they expected teachers to be 'content experts', well organized and proficient at whatever method they attempted to employ. One student stated it this way: "He should be basically knowledgeable in the area. I don't care whether he's that personable, I don't feel like I need a personal relationship....I feel like I'm here

as a consumer, for my own benefit....We're here for business and that's that." Another student said, "I think research is important, but if you're going to teach, (and) that's how you're earning your bread and butter, you damn well better know how to do it." Most respondents, especially married students, indicated that they had problems balancing job/family and school time. Respondents often referred to it as "a problem of juggling schedules", evidenced from this student's testimony of a typical day: "Today I have my class. I get to work at 8:00 and work until 4:15, then I rush down here (campus) and try and find a place to park. I'm here until 7:00. I have a parent committee meeting until 10:00....It isn't the best situation, but that was the only way to do it (take the class)." Students also indicated they had problems finding blocks of study time, concentrating and dealing with anxiety over timed-tests. Increased levels of stress were common. Married students attributed strains in their relationships to lifestyle changes and shifting partner roles.

Examination of barriers to learning data revealed that 60% of all respondents considered job/family/school time at least somewhat of a problem, which tends to support the interview data. Kendall's tau associations between increased stress and balancing job/family/school time ranged from $\tau = .3597$ to .7202, ($p < .001$). Job/family/school time was also significantly associated with access to libraries, $\tau = .3758$ to .4444, ($p < .001$)., indicating that those who had problems 'juggling their schedules' and meeting requirements of family life attributed some of this strain to their difficulty in gaining access to library resources, especially during weekends and evening hours. The majority of students indicated that stress was at least somewhat of a problem; ten students rated it as serious to very serious.

Significant differences were found between males and females in learning style preferences. Females indicated a significantly higher preference for using language as a media for learning ($t = 2.99$, $p < .05$); males reported a significantly higher expectancy score (how an individual expects to perform in terms of course grades) than did females ($t = 2.22$, $p < .05$). These findings do not replicate those reported by Canfield and others for adult students in community college settings (8). Agriculture students also indicated a significantly lower preference for authority (instructor-directed classroom activity) than did education students ($t = -2.10$, $p < .05$) possibly as a reaction to the predominance of the lecture-as-teaching method reported by agriculture science students. One-way ANOVA tests also revealed that students with M.S. degrees or better had significantly higher preferences for teacher-authored activity than did students without M.S. degrees ($F = 3.959$, $df = 2.69$, $p < .05$).

A majority of students (53%) indicated a strong or very strong preference for establishing their own learning goals within the classroom. Correlation analysis indicated that the preference for self-determined learning goals variable was positively correlated with a preference for peer affiliation ($r = .6035$, $p < .005$), and negatively correlated with detail ($r = -.4965$, $p < .005$) and a preference for competition ($r = -.4334$, $p < .005$). It would appear that students who prefer to set their own learning goals do not necessarily prefer classroom environments with teacher-authorized structures. However, they do prefer to meet and work with their classmates.

Total self-esteem of returning adult students (Me = 32.7) was higher than that reported in previous studies (9). A median split technique was employed to facilitate analysis. Persons scoring below the median ($n = 33$), were considered to have a lower self esteem; persons scoring above the median were

considered to have a higher self-esteem (n = 37). Analysis indicated that students who reported that they had problems with study skills upon their return to school did have lower self-esteems (35.3%). Conversely, those without problems (33.8%) had higher self-esteems (X^2= 8.82, p < .05, phi = .3892). Thus, self-esteem is related to perceptions of skills needed in the classroom.

In brief sum, returning adult students do want to set their own learning goals, independent of the instructor. However, interview data indicates that students do value the role of the teacher as content expert and climate setter. This does have implications for the role of instructors in traditional classroom settings as returning adults demand more autonomy and control over teaching-learning interactions.

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